

Aminetou Ely Oral History Content Summary

Track 1 [1:21:19] [session one: 19 September 2015]

[00:00] Aminetou Ely [AE] Born Nouakchott, Mauritania, 13 December 1956 to traditionalist Arab family of 'fighters'. Explains role of girls, expected to undertake household chores without education. Describes own determination to attend school with brother, uncle's registration of AE at primary school. Mentions living with grandmother and absence of father. Mentions being favourite child. Describes being top pupil in class in first year, encouraging family to allow continued education. Mentions younger sister never educated, AE viewing own education as favour granted by family. Describes school atmosphere, playing among boys and fighting them, winning races, not accepting male dominance.

[06:13] Describes winter season in Mauritania, swimming in pond, trying to drown the boys, never touching the girls, AE considering them inferior to her. Describes atmosphere in open-minded household, wealth from rearing livestock. Remarks that livestock valued above furniture or property. Describes own thinness and family's will to fatten AE as girls traditionally are at a young age, for early marriage, practice dating from 11th century Mauritania. Describes detail of experience when sent to woman to be force-fed, AE's escape.

[10:34] Describes grandmother putting stop to further force-feeding of AE. Mentions mother's death when AE very young. Describes proposal of marriage when 11, story about AE's sabotage of plan at gathering. Describes militant activities for the Left, aged 12, distributing leaflets. Describes campaigning in own household, talking to domestic workers to raise awareness of their situation, influencing and empowering them to leave. Describes family's anger. Describes group activity with other children, armed with stones to attack police at demonstrations. Describes father's anxiety, beating AE, tying her up to prevent participation and constant arrest. Describes attending demonstrations in chains, regardless. Mentions father's work for Mauritanian Mining Association. Describes reading Vietnamese and Chinese literature, on Indochinese war. Describes being influenced by Marxist combat in Indochina, France. Mention of The Paris Commune.

[15:00] Anecdote about grandmother's nickname for AE. Father's decision to arrange marriage for AE at 13.

[20:07] Account of wedding day, extraordinary circumstances of ceremony.

[25:10] Describes birth of daughter at age of 14, feelings towards baby, continuing activism, establishing first Association of Mauritanian Women Democrats, 1974. Describes never retreating from cause, despite arrest and torture. Story about arrest in front of father.

[32:16] Reflects on prison experience. Describes family breaking all contact with AE, community of 30 'mothers' supporting her with sit-ins outside prison, demanding release. Story about breaking into police station with 15 women, arrest and severe torture. Mentions lack of lawyers at the time. Description of beatings and horrific bruising sustained. Explains white French dominance in justice system. Details of

case, disappearance of medical certificates submitted in evidence. Description of AE standing naked at tribunal to show evidence of beatings. Confirms age at time 14, unaware of pregnancy during ordeal.

[41:30] Describes a period of mass arrests, 'witch-hunt', gaining on mood of discouragement and exhaustion among activists resulting in withdrawal and division within movement. Describes one part calling for armed response, the other calling for dialogue, ensuing debate. Discusses impact of movement on progress in country, Mauritanian Government's revision of accord with France, creation of national currency, revision of customs agreement, integration of youth, first female minister. Describes Minister for Women as first woman to denounce polygamy, demanding personal status code of law rejecting polygamy. Describes mass support, comparing to today where women told polygamy tied to religion and non-negotiable.

[45:00] Describes single party Superior Council of Women active alongside National Democratic Women's Movement, also supporting girls' education, women's participation in decision making, women's place in politics, female deputies in Parliament. Describes support of Mauritanian People's Party (PPM). Acknowledges Superior Council of Women for acceptance of women bachelors, integration of girls in schools in rural areas. Describes impact of own organization's demands on country, explains areas of focus. Describes vision as close to Marxist. Describes shift in group, creating underground movement to support vulnerable in society. Describes parting ways with husband with differences in approach. Mentions influence of mother in Mauritanian society.

[50:00] Describes lack of domestic responsibility in own married life, freedom afforded by husband's household. Describes own parents' union from two different tribes, father's subsequent wives after death of AE's mother death. Describes school life as series of expulsions and suspensions for political activities, eventually being banned from schools in every area. Describes appeal for students and chance to re-join if signed pledge of non-activity, AE's refusal. Describes later passing entrance exam to business school, studying Administrative and Financial Management in Morocco, work for businessman. Describes work as controller for National Mining and Industrial Company (SNIM), Mauritania.

[55:00] Describes events of 1989-1991 against blacks, AE's response, organizing first mass demonstration in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, day after massacre. Describes arrest and imprisonment. Discusses racism as sole white participant for black cause. Mentions General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CGT). Describes dismissal from work, staying in Nouadhibou to support widows. Comments on lack of family planning for soldier's wives. Creation of Committee on Solidarity with the Victims of Repression in Mauritania.

[1:00:15] Describes using savings from own income for initiative. Remarks that blacks looted by whites. Describes lack of foreign aid at inception, interest from Agir Ensemble pour les droits de l'Homme (AEDH), Anti-Slavery but prohibited from working in Mauritania. Describes possibility of participating in African Commission of Human Rights sessions in Banjul, The Gambia, Dakar, Senegal, and Mali because could go by car. Describes creation of Senegal Radio with African activists, on going use of radio to promote cause over 24 years. Discusses advantage of being white,

attributing success of action to AE's voice emerging from black community. Mentions Algiers Resolution, 2000. Discusses importance of reparation, memorial obligation, identification, justice and punishment as lesson to future perpetrators. Denounces Ould Taya Government's execution of black Africans on 28 November, Mauritanian Independence Day.

[1:05:00] Discusses conditions among orphans of Taya executions, who lost advantage of state education. Calls for training to prepare lost generation for job market, improvement of habitat. Describes work undertaken to support this group. Describes advocating for reconciliation commission. Remarks that Mauritania coup d'état country. Describes path other activist women have taken, AE the only woman from original group persevering. Remarks on having no regrets.

[1:09:04] Describes second marriage to banker, also activist, birth of two daughters, ensuing difficulties due to AE's pursuits, husband's ultimatum. Remarks that made choice at age ten. Divorce, AE left with three daughters. Describes taking jobs, but always ending up leading union, finally starting own business to enable children's continued education. Third marriage to ensure children's security, separation after three years. Difficulty of not having diploma to get work, but always managing to work. Describes obstacles faced for children's schooling, being denied access to public schools. Reflects on approach of surmounting difficulties at every level.

[1:15:00] Describes reconnecting with family. Describes state use of family to pressure AE and decision to take alias of Aminetou Mint El Moctar, buying new passport. Story behind creation of Association of Female Heads of Households (L'Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille (AFCF)), 1999. Describes role of religion in own life.

Track 2 [duration: 42:31] [session one: 19 September 2015]

[00:00] Describes expansion of original group, AFCF representing cultural diversity in Mauritania. Mentions Arabs, Berbers, Haratins, Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof. Describes early meetings in home setting up Mauritanian tents furnished with rugs and mattresses, focus on status and rules for organisation, election of administrative boards.

[05:30] Describes lack of support from community and raising significant funds from donations of gold and precious items from women within organisation. Describes first missions in all country's 12 regions, increase of membership.

[10:39] Establishment of 13 head offices, 1999. Describes trip to France to meet Secours Populaire Français, donation of equipment shipped in container to Mauritania, supplying all offices. Describes using activists' homes in some regions. Establishment of 3500 cooperatives by 2005, membership of 6500 women. Describes ethnic component in different areas.

[15:00] Describes training given, financial set up for each office. Describes diversity of work undertaken by each, agriculture, craft, fashion. Describes investment of income. Describes literacy drive in Triangle of Poverty. Describes enlisting help of

teachers. Describes first funding from Global Fund for Women, 2005. Mentions Zeina Zaatari

[20:00] Describes using for visibility, holding workshop on Violence Against women, inviting government and international organisations. Describes project funded by Oxfam GB, campaigning for personal status code. Mentions Kan Fatimata. Describes successful campaign. Describes encounter with Women's Learning Partnership (WLP). Mentions L'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM). Describes funding from The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), The National Democratic Institute (NDI), The United Nations Development Fund For Women (UNIFEM), European Union (EU). Describes obstacles put in place by Mauritanian government to thwart activities. Describes accomplishment of EU funded project for legal reform, leading to funding of four further projects, international and national. Detail of projects, draft bill for Violence Against Women, building network of women's organizations, awareness campaign on personal status code, and code of national penal procedure.

[25:20] Describes campaign for removal of general reservations on Mauritania's ratification of The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Describes project on slavery and its after effects. Mentions Anti-Slavery International, Energy International, SOS Esclaves. Describes current project with Panos Institute West Africa (PIWA) with Senegal, Mali, Cameroon. Other project on international mechanisms and impunity. Comments that gained trust of EU. Mentions further projects on underage domestic workers, on ex-slave Hartaniyat women. Mentions partnership with Terre des Hommes International Federation (TDHIF), campaign 'Briser le Silence, Lever le Taboo' (Break the Silence, Lift the Taboo) raising awareness on Violence Against Women. Discusses modern slavery among women and children, including sexual slavery.

[30:00] Discusses biggest success in work on slavery. Discusses laws relating to slavery. Mentions Law 0482007. Discusses Article 22. Describes successful campaign for the inclusion of female quota in decision making processes. Describes use of WLP manuals in all territories for trainings on women's political participation, advocacy and communication skills. Mentions Mahnaz Afkhami, Asma Khader, Sakena Yacoobi, Governor of Sudan.

[35:30] Describes revision of bill on women's political participation, to increase 20 per cent quota. Describes female ministers including Minister of Foreign Affairs. Discusses lack of engagement of female ministers with women's issues, organization lobbying them. Describes impact of awareness building, men standing up against focus and discourse on women. Remarks that women perform better than men in Mauritania. Attributes visibility of women's abilities to WLP trainings. Describes minors working as domestic help in every household, often for families with limited resources, resulting in non-payment of salaries. Describes circumstances of minors arriving in city from rural areas, rape and abuse in households. Describes project in partnership with TDHIF, Lausanne, Switzerland, ACIT-Spain.

[40:00] Describes impact of project, American, French, Spanish embassies consulting AFCE. Describes example of database on child labour. Describes services provided for girls.

Track 3 [duration: 38:07] [session one: 19 September 2015]

[00:00] Describes process when young girl comes to AFCF for help. Describes shelter provided, Centre Najda, financial and practical support extended to family with income generating activities introduced to enable school attendance for minors, literacy programme and training for older girls.

[05:00] Describes rise in literacy rates since feminist movement, and government's obligation to integrate international systems. Mentions United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Fund For Women (UNIFEM). Discusses fact that to date never invited to United Nations (UN) conferences. Describes presentation of controversial report in Geneva, Switzerland in front of Mauritanian delegation. Describes assisting at World Congress on Juvenile Justice, attendance of World Movement For Democracy forum. Mentions membership of Equality Without Reservation (EWR), Equality Now. Mentions François Hollande, Abdou Diouf. Discusses poverty, conflict and dictatorship in Africa and resulting migration. Mentions Syria. Discusses importance of global voice/platform. Discusses tradition and customs as burdens, women as first target of religious extremism.

[11:36] Discusses fatwa against her. Mentions Salafists, Daesh, Boko Haram. Detailed description of Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir case.

[15:18] Story of fatwa against AE. Mentions National Order of the Legion of Honour, awarded by France. Describes security provided by Agir Ensemble pour les droits de l'Homme (AEDH), Amnesty International, Emergency Trust Fund For Africa. Discusses work effort in context of fatwa and wider implications of status quo in country.

[21:41] Describes positivity, reflecting on achievements in bringing change in cultural practices. Describes responses in society to AE's cause. Attributes success to young women working for organization, comprising all Mauritanian communities.

[25:58] Describes lack of funding as biggest setback to work. Discusses organizational stance on funding. Discusses position between Africa, Europe, Arab world. Discusses impact of Mauritania's link to Senegal. Mentions Guinea and Mali, Morocco. Describes relationship with donors. Mentions ACIT, TDHIF, EU.

[30:30] Discusses nomination for Nobel Peace Prize, previous award of Human Rights Prize of the French Republic, 2006, Heroes prize [USA], National Order of the Legion of Honour [France] Georgetown University, USA, 500 Most Influential Personalities in the Muslim World. Describes awards in Mauritania, from Young Chamber of Commerce of Mauritania, independent press, 'African Women Leaders'. Discusses positive impact of prizes on work of organisation.

[34:36] Describes proudest achievements.